all of your love will be exorcised, a coda.

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all of your love will be exorcised, a coda.

by MaidenMotherCrone

Summary

There is a moment—before battle breaks. It is the quietest moment, where the blood roars the loudest. And there will be blood. That is something the seven of them, cast to the four corners of England, can all agree. It is one of the only things they know to be true.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny run their mission, blazing a path for their allies across the English countryside.

Neville and Luna attempt the impossible, leading a fractured people amongst fragile minds, through a frozen wasteland.

Draco navigates the minefield of London, in the wake of the Dark Lord's takeover.

Harry—Harry *waits*. Harry dreams.

War is the most brutal of instructors. It comes. All they must endure is this—the quiet before. The moment.

***

A coda, made of seven pieces.

Notes

title from Seven Devils by Florence + the Machine

See the end of the work for more notes

Ginny's entire world used to consist of one small village. The village she was born in, raised in, lived in. And then with an idea from a green-eyed boy-saint- *Lector* , her world had grown so much larger. Now, the entire outside is her world and it is on fire. It has been on fire—she has been on fire—for weeks now, and despite it all, the world is so very quiet.

" *Reducto!* "

The spell goes wide, hitting a scorched beam. There's the cracking of wood and Ginny just dodges it as it comes crashing down, blocking the windows. Ginny skids to a stop, cursing as she looks over her shoulder.

Gunnar Grimmson, a higher ranking soldier of the Alliance, grips the doorframe, saliva frothing pink with blood. It drips down his chin, his eyes black as he glowers at Ginny.

She's led him on a chase throughout his middling-sized estate, slipping through the cellar, destroying his wine collection, and magical portraits of his ancestors. Ginny has caused havoc through his guest bedrooms, destroying the Dark books in his libraries, except for the few that she had stolen and shrank because she'd thought that they would interest Hermione. She had let him chase and catch her, all the way at the exact opposite of where he should want to be.

"Nowhere to go, you little bitch," he snarls. He takes another step forward. "What did you think you were going to do? Real damage?"

Ginny takes a step back, hands behind her back as she watches him, keeping him square in her gaze. She dips her chin, looking at him from under her lashes.

"Didn't I?" she coos, her mouth twitching with ill will.

Grimmson's eyes narrow. "What do you me—"

" *Viscera Expellum!"*

Grimmson pales as he just barely dodges the Entrail-Expelling Curse. And then, he reacts in fury all over again. "How dare you? *Cru—* " He stops when someone taps on his shoulder and slowly, he turns.

Ginny smirks.

"Don't touch my sister." And then Ron swings, his fist cracking against Grimmson's jaw *hard* . Grimmson's head snaps to the side and he stumbles.

"You got it?" Ginny asks.

Hermione scoffs. "Come on," she calls without answering.

That's answer enough. Ginny grins as she runs straight past Grimmson as he recovers and she laughs when she dodges a sickly yellow light that flies too wide. She spins and casts, "

Bombarda!" and finds great pleasure in the explosion of drywall and brick.

It's only muffled slightly when a shard of brick slices open her eyebrow and blood spills over her cheek. She smudges it away, the pain a dull throb that she can easily push aside. "You think this will scar?" she taunts. "I hope it does. It'd be a wicked story."

Gunnar answers it with another sickly yellow bolt of magic that turns wood into dust, just a meter from where Ginny had stood only seconds ago. The next spell doesn't hit purely due to the strength of Ginny's Shield Charm. She sneers, preparing to stand her ground.

"Enough playing around, Gin, let's *go* ," Ron insists, grabbing her elbow and tugging her along.

Ginny stumbles, her feet tangling and she jerks away. "I've got myself," she snarls, sending a wind spell that shatters all the windows in the corridor they're running down, glass blowing outwards in powdery matter that sprinkles the icy ground below.

"This isn't a joke," Hermione warns as they thunder down the steps, her little beaded bag bouncing against her side.

"It's never been a joke," Ginny says through gritted teeth.

"Then, why are you—"

Ginny glares at her brother. "Come on, Ron, is now the best time?" she snarls. He'll ask her again, Ginny knows. Later. And once again, Ginny will claim that it isn't the best time, because there's never a 'best' time.

There's only now, the quiet moments that she fights to fill with the sound of *fighting* and her *laughter* , because she thinks if she let it be quiet, she'd drown in it—

(the sorrow, the grief, the people she's lost.

the promise she'd made to herself,

the one she'd meant to keep.)

"Get back here!" Grimmson roars.

They're close to the doors. The minute they're free, at the edge of the estate lands, they'll catch their breath and be gone. Grimmson will emerge and see his home *burning* . He'll be trapped by his own mourning, just like Ginny fights to not be trapped by her own.

"Come and get us," Ginny taunts, laughing brightly.

Grimmson skids to a stop in the growing flood of water in his Entrance Hall. Ginny sneers.

She lifts her wand. " *Incendio—* " and the world is set on fire.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The jet of green is the coldest color that Ginny has ever seen in her life, almost like lake ice. Her heart stops and she watches as the spell heads straight for Ron, and only by the grace of Magick, does he jerk into Hermione's side and the spell flies right past him and out the open front doors.

Ginny stops laughing. She bares her teeth as Ron turns so pale, his freckles remind Ginny too much of the ash on the snow at Godric's Hollow.

She can feel the curse on the tip of her tongue, but for once, Hermione is faster.

" *Stupefy!* "

Grimmson doesn't move to block it fast enough, his attention too much on Ginny and he drops like a brick. There's a loud cracking sound and Ginny's eyes widen as a beam goes crashing down, and suddenly the house starts to come down like a house of cards. Ginny's frozen, staring as the Stunned man catches alight, his life coming to ruin.

"Come on, come on, *come* on!" Hermione's shout sounds in her ear like a siren, and then, her hand is around her wrist and then Ginny's being Disapparated.

When she appears, she stumbles into Hermione's side, caught between her and her brother. Ginny looks up, wide-eyed. Hermione looks shaken, her hands digging into Ginny's arm.

"He's dead," she whispers. "I killed him."

"Fucking deserved," Ginny spits, pulling away and she whoops loudly, stumbling away from the pair. She looks between them, wild-eyed, her blood pumping wildly. "Did you see his *face?* Wait…Ron, how are you?"

Ron scoffs. "Fine," he says as he limps towards Hermione, cupping her face. "You alright?"

Hermione shudders in his arms, and Ginny looks between them, unsure of why he's asking her, why he's worried about Hermione when she's fine, when she just brought a building down on an *evil* man.

"I'm fine. Sit down," Hermione rasps. She presses a kiss to his chin before she reaches into her small bag, hooked around her shoulder and she sets it down on the ground, looking around at the clearing. She pulls out a flat folded piece of tarp and tosses it to Ginny. "Set up the tent."

Hermione turns, lifting her wand. " *Protego Totalum. Salvio Hexia. Muffliato. Cave Inimicum…* " she chants, casting her protective spells.

Ginny tunes it out as she pitches the tent, watching as it springs up into being and she dips inside, flicking her wand lighting all of the lanterns. It's not particularly big, but Luna had never promised it would be. The larger tents were needed by the two Horizon Alley camps,

which is fine. It serves their purpose well enough. Ginny looks around at the two sets of bunks. It had been meant for four.

Now, it's just three. *That's fine* , Ginny thinks.

(It's not.)

Ginny breathes deeply as she looks out from the tent entrance as Ron limps over to a tree stump.

"Did you get it?" Ron asks as Hermione gets to starting the fire. He yanks up his trouser leg and hisses when he looks at the cut. It's not so deep. Nothing a bit of Essence of Dittany won't cure. " *Accio* Hermione's bag." The beaded bag clatters into his hand and he winces when he hears a pile of books thunder.

"Careful!" Hermione warns. " *Incendio* ."

The fire lights, spitting smoke up, the flames dancing merrily and casting shadows on the pale ground.

"Sorry, sorry," Ron mutters. " *Accio* dittany."

It jumps out of her bag and lands in his hand. Ginny drags her stool from the entrance of the tent and sits down heavily. She watches as Ron rubs the dittany on his cut, and skin grows back slowly, creeping over the wound, until it's pink and fresh.

"Let's see then," Ginny says, leaping forward and reaching elbow deep into the small bag. Triumphantly, she pulls forth the two important pieces of parchment. She splays it out on her lap and Hermione crowds behind her, looking over her shoulder.

It's a letter and a map. Hermione snatches up the letter before Ginny can see past the words *'Gunnar, the time has come—'* .

"What is it?" Ron asks.

"It's a map…and I think it's detailing the movements of the Alliance," Ginny says.

Hermione shakes her head, eyes never leaving the parchment. "No," she says softly. "It's a projection of the future movements of the Order. The fighters, that is. They're following them in the hope of intercepting."

Ron raises an eyebrow. "Who is ' *they'* ?"

"The Alliance is coming to England."

It’s quieter, here, in the forest.

Everyone is packed in tight, families sharing tents, people that have never spoken before sharing meals over the supper table, but it is so very quiet. It’s like no one wants to shatter the grief that pricks along their lashes, keeping their tongues in a bind. They’re drowning in it.

They’re all drowning.

Neville is drowning.

He swings the axe over his head and brings it down on the wood, watching it crack in half and he levitates the pieces into the large pile that he’s been working over. He dusts his hands off against his trousers and levitates another piece.

“Why don’t you use magic?”

Neville looks over his shoulder, staring dully at the kid. He’s young. Dennis Creevey is so *young* , but in the eyes, he looks far older. He also looks lonelier without his brother.

“Why should I use magic?” Neville asks.

Dennis shrugs from his perch on the tree stump. “Because you’re a wizard?”

Neville hums. “Sometimes…it’s nicer to have something to do with your hands,” Neville says patiently. He clears his throat. “What do you need, Dennis?”

Dennis is almost always underfoot. Neville thinks he’s trying to fill the void of the missing, so he never sends him away. He’s okay with Dennis following him around. Except when he wants to be alone. More often now, Neville finds that he wants to be alone.

“Madame Strout is looking for you,” Dennis says. “I think. I heard them talking about you and your…well, they said they needed to tell you something, but didn’t know how. Madame Strout and your dad said that.”

“What are you doing around the Healing tent, Dennis?” Neville sighs, setting the axe down. He inspects his woodpile. It’s not enough, not really, but it’ll probably last through the night. He stands and pulls his cloak around his shoulders and he beckons Dennis to follow him. “You know you’re not supposed to be around there. There are Potions brewing…people hurt…it’s not a place for you.”

“I don’t know…I…I was bored,” Dennis mutters.

Neville nods, clasping one hand over Dennis’ shoulder. “I know. Just…just try to stay out from underfoot. Go on and find Sally-Anne.”

Dennis is hesitant to leave him, but he goes. Neville keeps his eyes trained ahead as he moves through the thick of camp. Tents of different quality are pitched tall, smoke rising from the chimney of some. A few grim faces sit sentry by the entryways, tired of being inside. He can hear arguments between two men—probably over sharing a new, smaller space. Neville has mediated more than one of those by now, though he’s not very good at it.

He wishes his dad could do it. Or his mum. And yet—

Neville shakes his head and steels himself as he walks up to the medical tent. He looks over his shoulder as if expecting someone. He knows there's no one. Just him. He shoves aside the tarp and enters. It smells astringent like it's been overly sterilized and like sadness. Neville looks to his right. He recognizes Wilfred Fiddlewood, but only barely. His face is still covered in healing burns, peeking out from underneath freshly washed bandages. It's only been two weeks.

If he were back in London, he would've been Healed already. It's hard for Neville to get the necessary ingredients to grow. The frozen ground is unforgiving.

Next to Wilfred are the Quilt twins. The girl, freshly seventeen, is nursing a broken leg. The boy has a matching arm. His arm is healing faster, already in a sling, but the girl's leg had been broken in four places. A *nasty* Tripping Jinx.

Neville nods at each of them, and the rest too. He makes his way towards the Potions station.

"Hey…Healer Strout," Neville says.

Miriam Strout is the only real Healer in all of their camp. She's the only St. Mungo's trained Healer that came through with them. She looks the way Neville feels, run ragged. The circles underneath her eye are purple and her hand shakes as she directs her wand, causing the potions to turn, counter-clockwise in the first dented cauldron and up-down-half-turn on the second. She looks up and smiles, thinly.

"Neville," Healer Strout says. "Your father and I—"

"I heard," Neville says shortly. "How is she?"

Healer Strout shrugs. "No change. It's not her first time under the Cruciatus, but…Madame Black's is…"

"I know," Neville interrupts.

He doesn't want to think about her.

(You are my son, *she'd screamed.*

She loves you, he'd realized. She loves you.

You are her son. And she betrayed you.)

"Your father's back there with her. Trying to get her to eat. Today's…hard," Madame Strout says.

Neville nods. “Is there a chance of…recovery?”

Madame Strout grabs his hand in her shaky one and nods firmly. “There is *always* a chance. She’s not broken, Neville. She’s just…fragile.”

She looks broken, Neville thinks when he finally passes through the white curtain divider and looks at her.

Alice Longbottom doesn’t look like herself. Her eyes are glazed over, her fingers moving in quick knots over the threadbare sheet over her thighs. She looks small, wrapped in cloaks and she won’t even acknowledge the spoon at her lips or Frank’s coaxing words.

“Come on, Allie. Just a little?” he asks.

Alice hums to herself, fingers moving faster. Neville knows she won’t be eating, at least not for a few more hours, if at all. She’s lost in her own mind, to a song and a melody that only she knows. Neville sits at the end of the bed and looks at his father. Frank looks up at him, face wan.

He hasn’t left the medical tent since they’d arrived. He hasn’t done much of anything except kiss Neville’s forehead when he’d arrived with Luna, and hold Alice’s hand.

“Hey, Mum. It’s Neville,” he says quietly. He dips his head, attempting to meet her eyes. Her gaze flicks up once, locks on him and she twitches had, before she looks away, avoiding eye contact. Neville sighs and rubs his forehead. He looks over at Frank. “Dinner is soon. It’s venison and bone broth.”

Neville doesn’t say *again* . He is very careful not to say it.

Frank nods. “I’ll…I’ll come out.”

“There won’t be much left. We’re not cooking for leftovers. We’re salting anything that’s left. We don’t know how long we’ll be here,” Neville says. He rubs his thighs and waits for Frank to say something. He doesn’t. He’s just staring at Alice. “Do you…do you know how to construct the greenhouses? A glass spell or something?”

“Just Transfigure,” Frank says absently.

Neville clears his throat. “I don’t know the spell.”

Frank hums. “Andromeda and Ted—”

“They’re not *here,* Dad,” Neville pleads and then he swallows his begging.

It’s not their fault. It’s no one’s fault. This was their plan. Separate. Reunite when it’s safe.

But, that was when they were going to leave tactically. That was when they thought they’d have time to Apparate back and forth with the vegetation they’d packed—food that they’re already a third of the way through. He’s just lucky there isn’t a harvest Meditat any time soon. He doesn’t think there’s any food to sacrifice.

“Ask Xeno—” Finally, Frank catches himself.

Neville flinches. Xeno’s not here.

It’s Alice and Frank. And him. It’s *Neville* that the rest of camp looks to now.

“Forget it. I’ll just…I’ll ask around. Someone will know,” Neville says. He clears his throat and reaches forward, grabbing his mother’s hand and squeezing hard. She doesn’t pull away. “I love you, Mum. I’ll see you later.”

Neville stands and looks down at Frank. Frank looks up at him, helplessly.

“Neville…” Frank says.

Neville claps Frank on the shoulder and squeezes. “It’s fine, Dad. I’ll bring you dinner later.”

Frank nods and turns back to Alice. Neville doesn’t look back. It’s too hard to look at her. He pushes through the medical tent again and only stops when Madame Strout calls his name.

“We need more lavender and murtlap, Neville,” Madame Strout says. “We’re running out of Calming Draught. And Murtlap Essence. And Burn-Healing Paste. And—”

“Right…um…I’ll talk to Luna. I’ll see what we can do,” Neville interrupts and then he rushes out, keeping his head down. He wishes he had a cloak with a hood. He’ll ask Luna if she’s willing to slip into a village with him to find some cloth.

Luna .

Neville inhales slowly. Exhales. He looks towards the center of camp. Closest to the fire, where everyone eats together. She’s standing in front of it. The fire isn’t nearly as large as it should be or Neville wants it to be. It barely warms, just enough to cook the food, and they snuff it out at night, so no one sees them. But, for now, Luna stands in front of it, draped in her mother’s cloak with the star hem, now lined with white fox fur.

Luna doesn’t know it, but she reminds Neville of the Grey Lady, from his days at Hogwarts. He thinks she would’ve been a Ravenclaw if she’d had the chance.

Her eyes are nearly black, pupils so blown they swallow every bit of white, everything but for a sliver of silver. She hums, reaching to the side to grab his hand.

“It’s a Meditat. The moon will be fun,” Luna says softly. Neville squeezes hard, leaning into her side. “It’s not safe to keep the fire.”

“No, it’s not,” Neville says regretfully. He looks over at her. “Are you looking for him?”

It feels dangerous to say his name out loud.

“I was trying, but…I need to scry,” Luna admits. She has a dark smile on her face and Neville relaxes only when her pupils begin to shrink to become something a little more normal. “My

mother used to scry. She had a flat plate that she looked into and…I used to use it too. But, it's gone now. It's all gone."

"Luna…" Neville says. He stops. He doesn't know what to say.

Luna shakes her head. "We'll go and look for a scrying plate later. Or I'll make it."

Neville nods. "Of course," he says. "We should talk. We…need to build a greenhouse. We need supplies."

Luna frowns into the fire. "Yes," she says. "But first…I need to pray."

"Pray for mum?" Neville asks.

Luna smiles weakly as she pulls her bandage from pocket and begins to wrap it around her eyes. "Always," she promises.

Draco's life had never been simple, he thinks. It hadn't been simple, no. But, it had been flat.

His days had been spent in the company of followers—Crabbe and Goyle—users—Blaise—and the odd friend or so. He had thought of nothing but whether Blaise thought he was handsome, or if his father approved of his outfit choice. Draco hadn't had priorities, not real ones.

His life is not flat anymore. No, it isn't. Instead, it is full and alive and far more frightening than anything he could ever imagine.

He looks at Hogwarts Castle; this had never been his home, per se, but he had always felt safe here. He remembers afternoons spent in Quidditch practice and breakfasts in the Great Hall. Lessons in the Potions labs and Duelling Practice in the DADA classrooms. He remembers when this place was just a school.

It feels far more like a tomb now.

"Do not make eye contact with him when you bow to him," Narcissa hisses in his ear, one arm looped into his own as they press close, heads bowed. Her gaze is suspicious, darting towards the family in front of them—the Parkinsons—and the single man behind them, Cornelius Fudge. "Simply recite the vow of fealty, bow, and come away from him."

"I know, Mother, I know," Draco snarls. It's enough that Pansy looks over his shoulder, curious. Draco pretends not to notice her, looking down into his mother's cold gaze. "I'm sorry."

"Hmm," she says. It sounds very much like, *you should be* . She squares her shoulders and looks from left to right. They are not just a single queue, walking this winding road. Either side is lined with the Dark Lord's forces.

There are the Dark Fae—the Unseelie—draped in shadows and thicketed thorns that just covers their grey-green skin, yellow eyes flashing with violence. Werewolves, caught in

various states of transformation—Draco recognizes one as Fenrir Greyback, their leader, their Alpha. Flanking the doors are a pair of ogres, foul, ugly creatures that they are. Then, there are the creatures of blackness and dark matter, horrifying creatures that Draco can't name but he knows that they are all here in service to the Darkest of Lords.

When they pass through the front doors, Draco and his mother are ferried along with the rest of the queue towards the Great Hall.

It looks different too. There are no more House banners or the giant hourglasses against the back wall. No, now there is a full empty space and atop the dais is a single stone throne.

A hooded man sits upon it, a wraith, the only part of his skin visible being his jaw and generous mouth and the spider-like hand that reaches out from the darkness, pale and slim. At his right, stands Barty Crouch Jr, his expression never shifting. A masked Death Eater stands to his right, but Draco recognizes his father easily enough.

The line moves slower now, each person before them moving to greet the one true Leader of all of Wizarding Britain. Just before the Parkinsons, Draco identifies one man as Wilkie Twycross, a Ministry worker whom had also served as the Apparition instructor at Hogwarts, for a time.

"Approach your Lord," Barty Crouch Jr commands.

Wilkie Twycross approaches and falls to one knee, baring his neck as if submitting to a wild animal. Draco can't see the Dark Lord's face, but he can't tell. There's something… *different* about him. Wilder. Colder. Like winter incarnate. Not death, but its Cousin. Draco tries not to shiver but fails, body trembling against his mother's side. Her hand tightens on his bicep.

"Do you swear loyalty to the Lord of all of Britain and her lands?" Crouch asks.

Twycross does not waver as he says, "I do."

"Do you commit your wand to the Lord of all of Britain and his cause, should he call?" Crouch asks.

"I do."

Crouch nods. "Do you reject the former authority of Gellert Grindelwald and his affiliated Alliance?"

"I do."

Crouch takes a step from the dais and leans in. "Wilkie Twycross, do you renounce Magick?"

Twycross pauses. "I…what?"

"Do you renounce Magick and all of Her Works?" Crouch barks. "Do you renounce Magick and Her *Voice* on Earth…the *Lector* ?"

Twycross finally blurts out. "Yes, I do. I do renounce Her! Her works! Her voice!"

And finally, Draco sees her and it takes all of his will to stop himself from recoiling as the great python slithers out from behind the Dark Lord's throne, her heavy body seemingly never-ending. She hisses, opening he great jaw to reveal slick white fangs.

The Dark Lord tilts his head and whispers, voice low and raspy, "He *lies* ."

Crouch's mouth curls into a wide, unhinged smile. "My Lord proclaims that you *lie* , Wilkie Twycross," he repeats. "How do you plead to this accusation?"

"What?" Twycross blurts out. "No, no, I'm not—"

He's stuttering. Through the break of Parkinsons, Draco can see the back of Twycross' head, and his trembling, shaking hands. His body gives him away thoroughly.

"You are lying, Wilkie Twycross," Crouch snarls. "What know *you* of Magick and the Lector?"

And Twycross' shivering slows, and he looks up and whispers. "Enough to know…that you will not make a heretic of *me* ."

Crouch's mouth curls. " *Crucio* ."

Twycross crumples face first and *screams* . Draco flinches and grits his teeth, grinding them together as he watches. When Crouch lets up the curse, Twycross does not get up, sobbing into the stone.

"Then, you will dig your own grave," Crouch declares. "Eoin. Eldia. Escort our new laborer to the dungeons for…onboarding."

Draco really does gasp when a pair of hags slink out of the shadows, old twisted-looking creatures made of warts and grey flesh, fingers tipped with black claws. Their backs are hunched and Draoc can't tell if they're bowing or not as they reach down for Twycross' arms and drags him, his knees tearing open.

And then it begins again. Draco watches as the Parkinsons swear their loyalties, their wands, renouncing Magick. Renouncing *Harry* . They don't even know what they're doing. Draco's heart aches as the Dark Lord makes no move of protest, accepting them easily and then they are swept away to be received elsewhere.

"Draco Malfoy. Narcissa Malfoy," Crouch declares. "You have proven your loyalty to our Lord. Prove it again."

"Of course," Narcissa says, sweeping into a low curtsey, her skirts billowing out around her. She does not rise yet and Draco sinks to one knee at her side. He stares straight ahead, keeping his gaze on the python that chases its tail around the Dark Lord's throne.

"Do you swear loyalty to the Lord of all of Britain and her lands?" Crouch repeats.

Narcissa and Draco speak as one: "I do."

“Do you commit your wand to the Lord of all of Britain and his cause, should he call?”

“I do.”

Crouch nods. “Do you reject the former authority of Gellert Grindelwald and his affiliated Alliance?”

“I do.”

“Narcissa Malfoy, do you renounce Magick?” Crouch demands.

“I do,” Narcissa says carefully.

“Do you renounce Magick and all of Her Works?” Crouch asks. “Do you renounce Magick and Her Voice on Earth, the Lector?”

“I do renounce Her.”

And then, Draco sees. He *understands.* And he thinks, Crouch does too, for he raises an eyebrow. Draco winces when he sees his father’s hand twitch. He waits for it; for them to be dragged away as Twycross was before them.

But, it does not happen. Instead, the Dark Lord raises his head and though it is still cast in shadow, his blood-red eyes *glow,* as rubies do.

“Draco Malfoy, do you renounce Magick?” Crouch asks.

Draco winces, attempting not to meet the Dark Lord’s eyes, but it’s as if he’s compelled. “I-I do renounce Him?”

Crunch nods. “Do you renounce Magick and her Voice on Earth, the Lector?”

Draco swallows. He has to answer. He has to renounce Harry Potter. He *has* to. And then, he realizes; his tongue is like lead. He can’t say anything. There’s a knot in his throat that isn’t just nerves.

(Once there had been a man, tall and freckled and strong,

That had asked a Vow, an Unbreakable One, of Draco.

Will you, Draco Malfoy, keep the secrets of Harry Potter as he so instructs? *he had asked.*

And should it be necessary, will you, do what must be done

to protect Harry Potter’s secrets against his enemies? *h e had demanded.*

And Draco had obliged.

He obliges now.)

“Draco,” Narcissa hisses violently.

There is a shift. Draco’s head twitches, as the knot in his throat feels like a hand, guiding his chin down, guiding his gaze down. He can see more of the Dark Lord’s flesh. His *feet* . They’re like any feet.

Human feet.

“I do renounce Her. I renounce him too,” Draco spits out and his tongue does not feel so heavy with his lies.

“Very good,” Crouch agrees. “Rise and join our brethren.”

Draco stands tall and for good measure, bows again as he helps his mother up. He refuses to look at the Dark Lord again. He refuses to look at his father. Instead, he walks towards the doors on the right and he winces when he sees them.

The Nott family is here, and there, behind Theo is the sole Greengrass that remains in the country—Daphne.

But, Draco cannot linger. His mother herds him away, into the stone passageway that leads away. She looks up towards the end and back where they’d come from and she cast a *Homenum Revelio,* which reveals not another soul.

“Are you well?” she snarls. “What happened?”

“I swore an Unbreakable Vow,” Draco spits. “I couldn’t…I couldn’t renounce him.”

“But, you did,” Narcissa mutters, and she looks fearful. “Draco, what have you done now?”

“It’s done, Mother. I’m fine,” Draco retorts, a little more spiteful than he means to be. He shakes himself. “We shouldn’t linger. There’ll be questions. And I want to…I worry about Theo. Daphne.”

Wisely—luckily—Draco’s mother does not ask what there is to worry about. She does not ask about what they know or what they’ve seen. Draco doesn’t think that he could handle her casual cruelty, how she wouldn’t care what happened to them. Not like he cares. When they walk to the end of the passageway, Draco vaguely recognizes the room as one of the empty cavernous classrooms, but it has been changed into a parlor of sorts.

There are none of the more common folk that have sworn loyalty. No, instead, it’s only the upper crust. The gentility.

“Draco, darling!” Pansy crows. She swaggers up to him, grinning broadly. She’s dressed far too finely to be simply swearing fealty to the Dark Lord.

Draco figures she’s using it as a coming out party of sorts. Her father has always been of the neutral persuasion until *recently.* Draco doesn’t know what the Death Eaters have on Piers

Parkinson, but he's rather subservient to the point of fanaticism. And Pansy doesn't question. She's never questioned what she's naturally seen as hers.

"Hello, Pansy," Draco says, suffering through the kiss to both cheeks, haphazardly returning it after his mother casts him a look.

"Play nice, my love," Narcissa says gently.

"Hello, Madame Malfoy," Pansy says politely. She's always been the picture of docility in front of Narcissa, explaining it away as getting along with her future mother-in-law.

Narcissa regards her coldly before murmuring her excuses and leaving.

Pansy pouts. "Will your mother ever like me?"

"My mother doesn't like anyone but those that share her blood and even *we* are on thin ice," Draco says honestly.

Pansy huffs, shaking her head. "Fine. I just thought that by *now* —"

"How are you, Pans?" Draco interrupts distractedly.

Pansy beams up at him. "Splendid now. Since the Dark Lord came into full control, Father's been promoted at work, did you know? Yes, he's out at all hours of the night now, but he always comes back with the Dark Lord's praises… *and* monetary compensation for his efforts. I can't believe this is how you've been living for years. My mother is just delightfully spiteful with how long it took him to come around."

Draco tunes Pansy out, preoccupied with the tenseness of his own body. He stares at the heavy wooden door and only sighs when the next through it is Fudge. He knew that would happen. He taps his foot, humming and nodding appropriately when Pansy speaks on her next trip to Diagon Alley.

And then, she says, "I hope it's safe to go, after that *riot* that those peons started at that ratty little flea market. Remember the one where those savages dance around the fire. I read about it in the Prophet—"

The words register enough for Draco to pause and say, "Wait…that's not what—"

And then, the door swings open again.

Draco inhales.

Theo walks in, with Daphne on his arm, both pale but not worse for wear, with Theo's mother just behind them, her arms cradling Theo's newborn sister.

"Theo! Daphne!" Draco cries out, jerking away from Pansy. He throws his arms around them both and Theo just barely catches him.

“Now, don’t sob into my shoulder,” Daphne teases. “This is crepe and my family’s accounts are under close watch at the moment, darling.”

Draco snorts, pulling back. “Fuck off, Daphne.”

Daphne winks.

Theo’s face is still stern. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“Draco,” Narcissa warns from across the room, where she’s ingratiated herself with the other society wives.

“We’ll be brief,” Draco says. “Want to visit our old common room.”

Narcissa’s gaze says, *It was all of our common room too. Careful.*

Draco turns away anyway and herds Theo and Daphne from the room. When they linger in the hallway, the pair stare at each other. Draco frowns.

“Where are your parents, Daphne? Your sister?” Draco asks.

Daphne smiles wryly. “My parents? My *mother* , the former Ministry opposition? Really, Draco.”

“She went into hiding. They all did,” Theo mutters.

“And you weren’t interrogated?” Draco blurts out.

Theo’s eyes narrow. “Of *course,* she was interrogated. You’d know that if you had even *thought* to Floo us. Or even write us,” Theo bites out. He takes a step closer, squaring his shoulders. “Two weeks ago, Ginny disappeared. Horizon Alley… *burned* . And you…we thought you…”

“He left days before,” Draco whispers. “He left and he told me not to tell anyone. And I… something happened. Between him and the Dark Lord.”

“What?” Daphne blurts out.

Draco still hasn’t made much sense of it. It’s hard to. All he knows is that the Dark Lord is… *different* now. Less and less human with each passing day. His cruelty reaches farther. There is something *monstrous* .

“I don’t know. I don’t know. But, we can’t—”

“A secret meeting, then?” Draco used to think he loved that voice. Now, it only grates his nerves.

He looks up at the door swings open and Blaise Zabini swans out, Pansy on his heels.

“What do you want?” Daphne asks lightly.

“I thought you were neutral, Greengrass. Where’s mum and dad?” Blaise asks loftily.

“I thought you were neutral too,” Daphne parries. “Finally decided to make a decision?”

“Did you?” he retorts.

Daphne reaches for Theo’s hand and squeezes hard. “I made my decision long ago.”

Pansy pouts, eyes flitting from Draco’s face over to Daphne and Theo. “I thought you were going to the common room. We want to go too. It’s been a while,” Pansy murmurs. She smiles, like she did when Draco and her used to be close, in Hogwarts, when Draco had leaned a little too hard into using her as a shield.

It’s only now that it’s not that Draco isn’t attracted to women; clearly, he is. It’s just something about *Pansy’s* smug face that he doesn’t fancy.

“Yes, Draco, it’s been a while. So many memories in that common room,” Blaise purrs. “Especially our old dorm room. Remember?”

Draco flushes. He lost his virginity in that room, during his sixth year. To this insufferable man.

“I—” Draco says.

“Draco, darling,” a voice calls. Narcissa peeks her head out. “I am remaining here with your father until the Dark Lord gives him leave. Return home. The twins are waiting.”

Draco nods. “Yes, Mother,” Draco agrees in relief. He takes a step back. “I’m sorry I need to go.”

“I do believe I left a cloak there last time I was over,” Theo says. “Daphne?”

Pansy lets out a sound from the back of her throat, her pout twisting to a far more savage grimace. “If you don’t want to be friends—”

“Of course we’re friends,” Daphne says. “Now, my love, I manage my home alone—my mother and father being traitors—but I will have you over when my house is in order. A dinner party.”

Pansy beams at the idea. “As long as you don’t have that mouthy little *Vassal* of yours around.”

Daphne’s smile never falters even as the lines at the corners of her eyes tighten. “Of course not. She was rather mouthy, wasn’t she?” Daphne laughs. “She thought that our conversations gave her leave to do many things. Obviously not. Now, come along, Draco. We mustn’t let the children wait. They’re a terror without…without their *Tutor,* aren’t they?”

Draco admires her for not breaking down into sobs. Draco only nods, face expressionless. They turn on their heels and walk steadily down the stairs, towards the kitchens. When they approach the giant painting, Theo tickles the giggling pear and they step through.

“Floo powder, please?” Theo asks.

“This ways, sirs, miss,” a house elf says, offering a flower pot full as he uses magic to lift a bubbling cauldron out of the way.

When Draco emerges into his own Floo room, he sags. Without tension, he is only exhaustion and fear. Even as he knows that it’s Daphne and Theo coming through the green flames, he expects worse—Crouch. Or even the Dark Lord, having known his lies immediately.

“Now, Draco, tell us everything,” Daphne demands as Theo and her hold hands.

It strikes Draco suddenly that *they* think he’s on the opposite side. They think—

“Come on,” Draco says, turning away from them. He can’t explain it. He’s not good at explaining.

But, he can show them.

“Draco!” Theo barks. “We need to know what is going *on* . Our friend is gone. Her brother. We haven’t heard from you or…or your *cousin* and Horizon Alley is ashes. We only know what the Prophet reported. There was a fucking riot or—”

“There wasn’t!” Draco calls over his shoulder as he leaps up the stairs two at a time. “I don’t know what you’ve read but it’s all a lie.”

“But, the Prophet! We saw that poster of Harry one day and then the next day, they stripped all mention of him completely. And then, nothing, and suddenly two days later, the Prophet said that there was a plan to burn down Diagon Alley in protest, but that the Aurors discovered it and there was a riot and—” Daphne insists.

“Nope,” Draco insists. He turns to look at them as he backs towards his room. “It was Grindelwald and the Dark Lord. They were looking for Harry. And he wasn’t there because he left days earlier. They burned it down. I helped Ginny and Hermione and Luna out. They left. With Ron and Neville. They’re all gone.”

“ *Gone* ?” Theo blurts out. “Gone *where* ? There’s nowhere to go! The Dark Lord is taking over all of Britain. Alliance homes are being raided. Neutral homes are being *destroyed* . Daphne has nowhere to fucking *go* .”

“I know, I know,” Draco says. “But, we’re going to…we’re going to help fix this.”

“How?” Daphne snarls. “If you haven’t noticed we just swore loyalty to the Dark Lord.”

“Well, I lied,” Draco sneers. “Just like you two did.”

They look ashen, as if only just now realizing the gravity of their actions. Draco finally stops at his bedroom door. He turns to look at it and takes a deep breath, drawing his wand. He can feel their disbelief as he carefully unravels the wards on his door, all of them painstakingly set up. It’s as if there are a dozen locks on his door and with a single *Alohomora,* the final one comes undone and the door creaks open.

“Okay,” Draco whispers. “Okay, so, I need your help.”

“Help?” Daphne asks as they enter the room and then she gasps. “Oh… *oh,* Draco.”

Draco swallows as he looks up. There are strings of twine hanging across his ceiling, parchment pinned in order along it, words moving and zooming. Spilled ink and torn paper everywhere. In the corner, where his vanity used to be, is a printing press, magically spitting out more parchment. He’ll need to replace the parchment soon. He’d made this purchase covertly just last week, after procuring Polyjuice Potion and the hair of a random Muggle from Surrey.

He’s moved his desk in next to his bed. *Her* essays remain there. In perfect condition.

“Is this…the Quibbler?” Theo whispers.

Draco turns to look at them uncertainly. “Luna…left this to me. I can’t let it stop. I promised Ron. I promised Hermione…we know the truth, don’t we?” Draco asks.

Daphne lurches forward, taking it and nodding. “We do. *We* know the truth,” Daphne whispers. She looks over at Theo. “And we’ll tell the world, won’t we?”

Theo doesn’t hesitate. “Always. No matter what. We’re with your Draco, until the end.”

Draco knows then that they understand what the end might mean. He takes a deep shaky breath and smiles, feeling just a little braver.

“Good. Let’s get started.”

“Thanks for dinner, Mione,” Ron says, leaning down to kiss her temple as he slides into the chair next to her, picking at the dried venison meat and the mushrooms that she had been tasked with scavenging and sauteeing that evening.

“It’s just meat and mushrooms,” Hermione says flushing, her dark skin reddening.

“Better than the shit that I would’ve made,” Ginny acknowledges, toasting a tin mug of Butterbeer at her. ”Thanks.”

Hermione snorts, leaning back in her chair. She tilts her head back in her seat and takes a deep breath, not immediately digging into her food. Ron has not such hesitations, devouring his food even as he looks at her, admiring the lines of her jaw, the lack of tension in her shoulders. He hasn’t seen her so relaxed in ages.

“How’s your leg?” Hermione asks without opening her eyes.

“Fine,” Ron scoffs. It’s been days now.

“Just making sure,” Hermione murmurs before she sits up and begins to eat again.

Ginny hums into her meal. “So, who next?” Ginny asks.

“Ginny, can’t we just eat?” Ron groans. “And maybe sleep for a week.”

“No sleep for the wicked,” Ginny says.

Hermione snorts. “Good thing we’re not the wicked.”

“You sure?” Ginny asks, quirking an eyebrow. She leans in, serious-faced. “I’m being real, though. Who next? Simon Kraft? He has an estate in Ireland. It’ll take a while to get up there, but worth it, yeah?”

Ron grinds his teeth. He wracks his brain for information. He doesn’t know much about Kraft, but he can imagine that Grindelwald would *like* someone to remain in Ireland. Voldemort—ugh the name gives him shivers— *You-Know-Who* doesn’t have a firm grasp up there yet, focusing his attention on England and Scotland. It’d be better to swing in now.

“Yeah, maybe,” Ron allows.

“I thought…well, I thought we might rest,” Hermione says earnestly. “Maybe…go back to the camp in the Forest of Dean?”

“Whatever for?” Ginny demands.

Hermione stares at her like she’s slow. “To go back to Neville and Luna. See if they need our help.”

“I’m sure they’re doing just fine,” Ginny says.

Hermione frowns. “I’m not so sure,” she says, and then she looks at Ron, expecting him to agree. To immediately agree.

Ron hesitates.

“If we *do* go back, we have to be careful. Just to see Luna and Neville for supplies. And that’s it. *No* one else,” Ron says warily.

Ginny nods her agreement even as Hermione frowns between them.

“But, why? The Tonks—” Hermione starts.

“Aren’t with them, and who’s to say when they will be?” Ginny interrupts. She dusts her hands on her trousers and clears her throat. “Better to steer clear of the Forest of Dean until we’re sure we’ve done all that we can. And even then, I’m not sure if I want to go back.”

“Well, why not?” Hermione asks, affronted.

Ginny rolls her eyes, dismissive. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m *not* ,” Hermione barks. “It makes sense. We’re roaming England, searching for Alliance strongholds, and what do we even have to show for it?”

“We’re removing the Alliance from England.”

“And just allowing the Dark Lord to claim the remains,” Hermione spits, silencing Ginny. “We don’t have the manpower to stake claims in the name of the Order. We don’t have the authority. It’s only us, and even that won’t be enough. Grimmson almost *killed* Ron, only two days ago. We need help!”

Ginny sneers. “We’ve never needed *anyone’s* help.”

Hermione barks out a laugh that sounds edged with mean. “No? Well, then why were we trapped in London for *months* ?”

“We got out fine,” Ginny spits.

“Ginny—” Ron warns.

Hermione’s eyes widen and her nostrils flare. “Fine?” she snarls. “ *Fine* ? People fucking died, Ginny. You saw it. Seamus’ mother. People were *tortured* . Alice. Families separated. People *arrested* . And that’s only the day we escaped. Not all of us got to be dressed in fine robes like a *doll* . Some of us were beaten and tortured and had psychological *warfare* conducted on us until the sound of their Mistress’ laugh—”

“Don’t be weak, Hermione. It doesn’t suit you,” Ginny says coldly.

Hermione rears back like she’s been slapped. “You are cruel and terrible, and you wonder *why* he didn’t—” And then, Hermione storms out, holding her tongue.

Ron’s eyes shutter as he rounds on Ginny. “What is *wrong* with you? Why would you say that?” he roars.

Ginny looks panicked, flushing. “It just came out!”

“Being *awful* just ‘came out’? Merlin, Ginny,” Ron spits. “Could you just…” Ron starts and shakes his head.

Ginny glowers up at him. “Can I *what* ?” she spits, vicious.

Ron makes a frustrated sound and leans down to look her in the eye. Ginny rears back like she’s surprised that he’s lowered himself to her level as if she were a child. “You are not the only one hurting here. You aren’t the only one that misses him,” Ron snarls.

Ginny’s cheeks flush with righteous fury. “I do not—”

Ron turns on his heel and stalks away because he is too *tired* for a fight with her. As soon as he leaves the warmth of the tent, he is greeted by the grey-blue sky as the sun starts to set behind a swathe of clouds. He looks at her back.

Hermione sits in front of a fire that she’s just managed to spot, her dark curls tamed back into a single puff at the nape of her neck. She’s muttering to herself and Ron’s mouth twitches even as he knows she’s cursing his sister.

“Lover,” Ron says.

Hermione scoffs, looking over her shoulder. “What?” she barks. “Come out here to tell me that you agree with your sister?”

“Well…yes and no,” Ron says. He looks behind him, ensuring that Ginny won’t come out, because there’s nothing he needs less than for her to emerge, smug. Ron sits next to her on the log. He nudges his shoulder against hers as she stares into the fire. “She’s right. If we meet up with Luna and Neville again, how can we be sure that the Order isn’t there? My *mother?* You think she won’t demand to know what we’re up to?”

Hermione sags, buries her face in her hands and shakes her head. “But, shouldn’t we…we’re finding all this information about the Alliance and their movements and we can’t do it all by ourselves, Ron,” Hermione says, voice ragged. She looks up at him. Her face is too skinny. “We are going to die trying. It just takes *once* . Ginny, too reckless. Me, less clever. You, too slow. And then…we’re done. And we won’t be there to help end the war or to kill the Dark Lord or find *Harry* —”

Ron grabs her hands in his and squeezes hard. He leans his head atop hers and sighs into her hair. “Of course, we’re going to live through this. Of course, we won’t die.” He tries to sound confident and he thinks he manages.

Except, Hermione scoffs. “We won’t?”

“Nope. We haven’t gotten married yet.”

Hermione snorts. “Ron—”

“Who’ll buy the wedding bands?” Ron demands. He looks down at her and twists to face her entirely, their clasped hands between their bodies. “Who, Mione?”

Hermione sighs warily. “The river. And the wedding table?”

“The trees,” Ron says readily. He leans in, pressing his forehead to hers. “The wedding bed?”

“The birds,” Hermione rasps. “Because Magick wills it so.” [1]

He nods, closing his eyes. *Magick wills it so,* he reminds himself. They breathe together, silent and together by the fire. When he’s ready, he opens his eyes and he sits back, surprised when he sees that she’s staring at him, the tiniest smile on her lips. She tilts her head and leans in, pressing a soft kiss to his lips that he returns, eagerly. When she sits back, she looks more content than ever, turning back to the fire.

Ron forces himself to ask, to think one of the many questions he hasn’t stopped thinking of. Somehow, this one feels easier to ask than the question that’s loudest in all of their minds.

“Do you think…Malfoy is alright?” he says.

Hermione’s head whips around and she stares at him.

“I thought—” she stops.

(She thought he would ask about Harry.

He wouldn’t, Ron thinks. It’s still too painful.)

“Well, do you?” Ron pushes.

Hermione sighs, balancing her elbows on her knees. “I…hope so,” she says. She sounds like she means it. She looks up at Ron and Ron can see it now; she’s tired. She’s so, so tired. Ron crouches in front of her, rubbing a thumb over her cheekbone, grazing the dark circle under her eye. “I’m worried.”

“Worried?” Ron repeats.

Hermione nods, sagging into the curve of his palm. “He’s just published another issue of the Quibbler. It’s dangerous. So dangerous.”

“It’s brave,” Ron says. He’s not correcting her. Simply adding to her observation. Hermione nods her agreement, but she looks exhausted by it.

Hermione digs her heels in and says, “He was…interesting. Not at first though. I thought he was like all the rest. Bigoted. Classist. Damned. I thought Harry was wasting his time with him. But, he wasn’t. He wasn’t wasting his time at all. But, I feel like…like we *lost* time.”

“We didn’t have enough time,” Ron says softly because he understands what she means.

There had been an inkling of something. Something small and *real.* He thinks he felt it the first time he’d laid eyes on Hermione too. The strange feeling that this girl was *important,* even if she turned his stomach all at once. And he had had the time to figure out what that was. He didn’t have that with that Draco. Neither did she.

“Maybe after,” Hermione says. She doesn’t sound like she believes it.

“He promised,” Ron rasps.

Hermione scoffs. “Promises are made to be broken.”

Before Ron can say anything, Ginny flings the flap open, emerging. She has her boots on still but she’s layered with one of Ron’s sweaters. She folds her arms over her chest, holding a tin cup. She doesn’t say sorry.

Not at all.

But, she does come closer and offers the tin cup of tea to Hermione. Hermione takes it and sips deeply, nodding her thanks.

“Where are we off to next?” Ginny asks.

Hermione sighs, looking over at her, warily. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Maybe,” Ginny says. “But, we’ve things to do. If we’re to be done before the next Meditat.”

Privately, Ron doesn’t think they will be. Or that he doesn’t want to be. Either. He doesn’t know if he can stomach a Meditat without Harry leading. He doesn’t remember one where he hadn’t heard Harry’s song, except for the Meditats they’d all missed when first adjusting to London.

“We need to rest. That was a close call. *You* had a close call,” Hermione warns.

Ginny rolls her eyes and tosses her head. Ron frowns and Ginny catches it immediately.

“You want to start again?” Ginny demands.

“No,” Ron barks.

But, Ginny’s itching for a fight. She’s been itching for a fight more often than not. “We can’t stop. Grindelwald is coming for us. He knows that we’re associated with Harry. Or at least, he’s figured it out by now.”

“We know,” Hermione snaps. “Which is why we need help.”

“We *don’t* need help. We can handle the Alliance. We can handle the Death Eaters. I reckon we can even handle Voldemort—”

For a moment, Ron feels like he’s falling through the air with no broomstick or wand in sight. His stomach swoops and he knows he’s positively green. Hermione feels it too, lurching forward like she might be sick. And then, she looks up, eyes wide.

“My wards just shattered—”

“ *Stupefy* !”

“ *PROTEGO!* ” Ron roars, twisting, watching at least three Stunners crash into his Shield.

They’re surrounded.

“Fuck!” Ginny cries out, scrambling back for the tent, her tin cup on the ground now, tea spilling out onto the frozen ground. Hermione jumps up, whipping out her wand.

There are five of them, dressed in black leathers and ragged robes. Four of them stand in formation around one man in particular that Ron doesn’t recognize as a Death Eater or an Alliance member. He doesn’t noticeably bear any mark.

“ *Impedimenta* !”

“Locomoter Wibbly! ” Ron cries out.

The pale, bald man on the left tries to lurch forward but moves slower than a snail. The man next to him collapses, rendered particularly useless by the Jelly-Leg Jinx. The spells that Ron defends against, Summoning tree limbs and conjuring Shield Charms in an effort to protect himself, are not nearly so tame. Some of the Dark curses and hexes, he doesn't recognize, but clearly, Hermione does from her low, mumbled curses.

"Through here!" Ginny shouts, running to the right and Ron and Hermione chase her, throwing back spells over their shoulders.

"Scabior! This way!" one of the remaining three calls.

"I know," their leader—Scabior—snarls. " *Incarcerous* ."

A rope lashes around Ron's ankle. Scabior tugs and Ron grunts as he nearly falls, except for a quick Severing Charm. He continues to run and swings around into the darkness, crashing into Hermione. She raps her wand over his head and then her own and she dissolves in front of him. Ron feels something that feels akin to runny egg sliding over his forehead as the Disillusionment Charm takes its hold. He practically stops breathing, hiding behind the massive oak.

"Where did they go?" Scabior roars.

"Disapparated?"

"No, we would've—back to their *camp* ," Scabior barks. "We'll get the other two up."

Ron doesn't breathe until he sees Scabior run past them again, ready to skulk around their fire. He nearly screams when he feels an invisible hand brush against his wrist, one that doesn't feel like Hermione's hand.

"It's me," Ginny hisses.

Ron feels Hermione sigh and shudder against him in relief. "Good. Have a hold? Disapparate now?"

"No!" Ginny barks, probably a little too loud. "We need the tent."

And then, she takes off, realizing sooner than later how loudly and vehemently Hermione would disagree.

"Fuck," Hermione snarls. "Your sister…"

"Come on, Hermione. Later," Ron warns. They're far more careful, approaching camp. It's not so far away, only a few dozen meters and when they approach, Ron is glad to see that they haven't gone *into* the tent yet.

Two of the wizards are reviving and helping up their comrades. The leader, Scabior, circles the fire that Hermione had built. He looks wretched, like something out of Ron's worst nightmares, sickly and hungry in ways that Ron can almost relate to, especially when there's nothing to scavenge and his stomach is scraped hollow with starvation.

“Can’t go back,” Scabior hisses to himself. “Go back without them means no gold. No gold means no food. No food means death. Can’t go back to death. To the dark.”

Hermione squeezes his hand in hers and sometimes, Ron wishes he could read her thoughts. Now, isn’t one of those times. He thinks they’d sound similar to his— *he’s mad* .

Ron’s eyes dart around, attempting to find traces of Ginny, maybe a footprint in the snow. He hopes that she’s being careful, but Ginny hasn’t been *acting* very careful over these past few weeks, too hellbent on kissing death at every turn. A branch cracks.

“ *Finite!* ” Scabior snarls, twisting and shooting a spell in Ginny’s direction.

The Disillusionment Charm cracks and Ginny stands there, wide-eyed, next to the tent. She jumps and hisses, “ *Reverte* ,” and the tent begins to break down, far too slowly.

Before Scabior can shoot another curse, Hermione ends their Disillusionment Charms too, and shouts, “ *Bombarda!* ”

Ron and Hermione throw themselves between Scabior and Ginny.

“Anytime now, Ginny!” Ron roars.

“Hold him off!” Ginny shouts. “We need the tent! Let me make *sure* —”

“Gin—” Ron starts and then he’s only saved by Hermione’s quick Shield Charm.

“Ronald! Pay attention!” Hermione squawks, twisting back around and following up with a Stunner that takes the next man on.

The one called Scabior licks his teeth looking at Hermione. Leering, he says, “Oh, you’re delightful, aren’t you, love? Fierce little one.”

Ron sees red. “ *Reducto!* ”

Scabior flicks his wand, sending the Curse into the thicket of trees and Ron flinches as he hears the explosion of wood echoing through the forest. The wizard’s eyes widen as he rears back.

“Oh, I hit a sore spot, eh?” Scabior taunts. “What is she? Your girlfriend?”

Ron sneers and sends off another curse—one of Ginny’s specialties, the Bat-Bogey Hex. Scabior Summons one of his own men and uses him as a shield. Ron groans as bogeys fly out of the man’s nose and attack him.

Hermione grits her teeth. “Don't pay attention to him,” she barks. “Pay attention to me. *Avis.* ”

She conjures a flock of yellow birds, all appearing so sweet and chirping, out of place in the forest. Scabior’s eyes narrow.

“Now, what are you—”

“ *Oppugno* !” The sweet birds turn into a swarm, jetting at Scabior and his group like tiny, hard Golden Snitches, and their shouts of pain grow louder than the birds’ sharp war cries. Hermione swings around and gasps when Ginny runs back to them, the tent having returned into a tiny square of tarp again.

Through the thicket of birds, Scabior raises his wand, teeth gritted around a spell.

Ron launches himself forward, wrapping Hermione in one arm and Ginny in the other, and Disapparates without another word.

It is harder now. For Luna to See.

(It is easier in dreams. In which, Luna is untethered to her form.

In which, Luna is free to fly above the Not-Yet Lands,

To taste the many paths and walk the many miles.

But, it is harder to make sense. It is harder now, harder than ever—)

When she tries, there is a block. Luna has been blocked from Magick before and it is never Her doing, always her own. It is not wavering faith, as the others whisper. No matter what, Luna’s faith has never faltered. She has never doubted Magick, nor scorned her, nor cursed her. Luna understands Magick, and her own role far too well to underestimate or to turn away. She has seen too much, known too much, even more now that she has heard the song of the Lector himself.

No, it is always Luna’s ill-fitting grief that blinds her, that she cannot make sense of, knotted and balled as it is.

Even when she is simply attempting to walk, not See, she is so very in the dark. The world is somehow duller. Colder.

“Alright, Luna?” Neville asks, staring down at her, worried that the Disapparation has discombobulated her.

“I’m fine,” Luna says absently. “I have wrackspurts.”

She doesn’t mean literally; she only remembers a time when Wayne Hopkins had a wrackspurt infection, and he’d described his mind as fuzzy. Luna thinks the whole world is fuzzy instead. Maybe she doesn’t have wrackspurts. Maybe the world does.

“How do we make them go away?”

Luna likes that he doesn't ask to humor her. He is earnest. *Always* .

"We don't. They'll leave when they're ready," Luna says. This is not categorically true.

If thinks positively, she can dispel them. She is not ready to.

Luna has never been to Hogsmeade before. She has never been to Hogwarts. As she looks up at the castle at the edge of the hill, she thinks that her life might've been so different if she were allowed to attend. Luna peels away from Neville, walking up the deserted road even as Neville hisses her name.

(They don't usually go to wizarding villages for supplies.

They stick to the Muggle towns where they can steal,

If they can't exchange money. If they haven't heard from Draco.

This time he has brought her here.

They need magical things for magical people.

Luna does not know any better. She does not know the streets,

Should be teeming with students, with child-laughter and sugar-spun kisses.)

It is so quiet here.

Through the swirls of clouds, Luna can see a castle, large and intimidating in its ancient loveliness. This is Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Every window is dark. The grounds are full of tents, it looks like. There is a *darkness* that lingers, and Luna thinks she would like to see it bathed in white. She takes another step forward, eyes cutting up, above the tallest towers.

There is something in the sky. A skull in green with a snake escaping its unhinged jaw.

Malevolent. Maker. Luna turns away, looking at the grounds, past an enormous Willow.

There are holes in the ground, large pits that look deep even from how far away she is. Long barrack tents.

"What is that?" Luna asks. Then, she stops as she realizes. "The camps. The death camps."

"Yes," Neville says quietly. He seems to have forgotten that he meant to call her away. "Do you think…he's in there?"

Luna wonders if he means to ask about Bellatrix. "Do you mean Bellatrix?"

Neville flinches and looks away.

“I do think he’s in there,” Luna says softly. “Her too.”

“Come on, Lu…let’s…let’s get the stuff and get out of here.”

Luna steps away, stretching her finger out as if she can save the people with her bare hands.

“There is such…sorrow in this land,” Luna says. It is a taste that she cannot forget, something that lived in the back of her throat for so long. It’s more than sorrow. It is *grief* here. And death. So much death.

“They dig their own graves,” Neville says mournfully, as fiercely empathic as her. He leans into her side, drawing strength, just as she does to him, the crook of them fitting together like puzzle pieces. “He binds them into contracts, promising them that once they’ve completed their work contract, they’ll be free. They always, *always* die before. They say…he’s digging for the ward stones.”

Luna frowns up at the castle, taking a step closer and then she falls back, glancing over at the lands. If she can see them, their hunched skinny bodies, they can probably see her. She pulls her cloak tighter over her head and huffs out, hiding her face.

“I don’t…it can’t be just that. He already has the wards,” Luna says calmly.

Neville lurches. “He… *what* ?”

“He’s claimed this land as his birthright. And the wards…the castle obeyed. But, still, they dig. He’s searching…still,” Luna says.

She had never seen the Dark Lord in her entire life, before the day he had appeared in Horizon Alley and watched it burn. But, when she had, he didn’t look like a man that Harry could love. And Luna knows that Harry *does* love him. He loves him so much that he’s sick with it. But, Voldemort is something horrifying. He is—

(Call him what he is, Magick purrs.

The world commands. The god who eats gods.

The Non-Believer. The Titan. Kronos.

Abomination *, Luna thinks,* I name you— *)*

“Heretic,” she whispers. “The Great Heretic sentences them to dig their way to freedom. Freedom in death and he would not be free of anything. He’d chain himself to life.”

She Sees it all. There is a prophecy at the tip of her tongue, the one that had been stopped short when she saw Fiendfyre and a phoenix and a woman with red hair and Harry's deep green eyes. Luna had spat bile and choked on future after future, as it turned and turned.

"Are you Seeing?" Neville asks.

Luna nods. "I think…I owe the Heretic a prophecy," she whispers to herself. She shakes her head, fingers flexing into fists. She doesn't want to owe him anything. She does not doubt, she tells herself. She cannot. And yet—

Who is he, that he deserves Magick's attention? Her *love* ?

"There was great magic done here," Luna says. She stops. "By a Lector. Or there will be. The past is a lie. So is the future. It's all in the in-betweens of now. It comes. It goes like this—the snake will eat its tail whole. And so the world turns. The ouroboros."

Luna turns away and inhales deeply. "Neville, I'm tired. Can we go?"

"Of course, Luna. Let's go get the supplies and go home."

Luna's home was a Rook that scraped the sky. It was the place that her mother touched and breathed and died in. It was the place her father had built.

It was gone. It *is* gone. It will always be gone.

The past is a lie. The future is too. She will move amongst the in-between.

They don't stop running for days. It is exhausting work, darting across England, climbing hills and trudging through sleet. Hermione's refreshed Impervious Charms more now than ever in her life. She's an expert at them. She's an expert at bathing with lukewarm water and living on a stomach that always feels half-empty.

When they finally stop running, it still doesn't feel like enough. But, they have to stop before they break down permanently.

They set up camp—their base—for the foreseeable future in absolute silence. When they're done, Ginny silently goes to start dinner. They really will need to go back to camp soon or start stealing. They're running out of dried meat and potions, and none of them are hunters nor do they have a Potions lab at their disposable.

"Did you cast the—" Ron starts.

"The Muffliato Charm? Yes. Three different detection spells? Also, yes. You watched me do them," Hermione says shortly. She's a little too raw to apologize verbally so she pats his knees absently, rubbing the knobby bone. Ron presses his hand atop hers, keeping it there.

"You did them wordlessly. I wanted to be sure," Ron says. He is patient. She is undeserving of his patience.

“Maybe we should check. They broke last time,” Ginny says. She doesn’t say it to be cruel, just matter-of-fact, but it stings Hermione anyway.

“None of my spells were faulty,” she bites out. “They didn’t *break* . They were shattered.”

Ginny’s nose scrunches like she doesn’t know the difference.

“Spells have counters. My spells weren’t countered. They were threaded and they held because it’s basically alchemy. The right amount of power. The right amount of words. All important variables. But, there are loopholes. Always. It’s like…a weak spot, and it’s smaller, the more powerful the spell is. I put a lot of power in my spells, but something *exploited* the weak spot,” Hermione says. It’s the simplest way to explain the magical theory and she’s too tired to launch into her usual lecture.

“So something…a spell?” Ron asks. “But, they weren’t there before.”

“No, they weren’t. So there’s a trigger,” Hermione says brow furrowing. She looks up as Ginny offers her more dried venison. Ginny shrugs her shoulder and Hermione chews at the salted meat, little better than jerky. “We just have to figure out what it is.”

“We could’ve been tracked,” Ginny suggests.

Hermione shakes her head. “When would we have been tagged?”

Ginny shrugs. “Grimmson’s?”

“I didn’t see any Death Eaters,” Ron supplies.

“ *Were* they Death Eaters?” Hermione challenges.

Ginny frowns. “No. Definitely not. Not good enough duellists. Bounty hunters, more likely. They seemed really organized though. Like they answer to someone,” Ginny says. She shakes her head. “We’ll just be more careful next time. Steer clear away from anyone non-Alliance.”

“That’s not enough,” Hermione insists. “We need to know the trigger.”

“It’s just *bounty* hunters. It’s not Vold—”

“Don’t say his name,” Ron blurts out. He shudders, heat coming to his cheeks as he looks away from his sister’s judgmental incredulity. “It just gives me the shakes. I call him You-Know-Who in my head.”

They’re always arguing nowadays. It’s hard not to argue. Before, in Godric’s Hollow, there was space to go to when they did fight. In London, they’d never been together enough to argue. And now, there’s nowhere to go.

(Now, Harry’s not there to balance them out.

That's what Hermione feels, without their fourth corner.

Unbalanced. A triangle stands, symmetrical.

But, Hermione had never cared for three sides.

Things are easier to look at from different sides.

Things are easier without fear, and without Harry,

She cannot be fearless. Fear of the Dark.

Fear of a laugh. Fear of a name—)

"Well, what if I don't know who?" Ginny demands. "You should just call him by his *name,* Ron. Volde—"

"No!" Hermione blurts out. The Weasleys turn to look at her, eyes wide and Hermione sputters as she stands, shaking her head. "No, no, no. We *don't* say his name!"

"Thank you!" Ron shouts, throwing his hands up in relief. "See? Hermione agrees—"

"I don't," Hermione retorts. Ron is silent and Hermione groans, rubbing at her scalp. "I was thinking…I was *thinking* that when the bounty hunters found us, they didn't dismantle my spells. Something else did. I was thinking there was no one around for *kilometers* except us until…until Ginny came out and said his name. And I was thinking about Harry and his fearlessness and how I am so *afraid* of everything. Even of his name."

Ron is looking at her like she's gone mad. He always looks at her like she's gone mad so she doesn't mind it. She paces, brow furrowed as she looks around the small tent that has become her world, that has become her anchored survival.

"His name?" Ginny asks. "Afraid of a name?"

"The only people that call him by name are his enemies," Hermione spits. "He's jinxed his name."

Ginny inhales sharply, falling back into her seat. "So when I…called his name, I summoned them? That was…me?" And for once, she sounds like she regrets her rashness.

Good, Hermione thinks uncharitably.

"I think so. We'll need to test it," Hermione says.

"Not here," Ron blurts out. "We can't bring them back to camp."

Hermione nods her agreement. She's already thought of all the way it's not safe to test even though she's sure they need to. She wracks through her brain and then she stops, looking

down at the map that's spread about them, the list of Alliance members cobbled between the three of them with approximate locations of the checkpoints and safehouses of each one, all throughout Britain.

"But, what if…we did go somewhere, say You-Know-Who's name, and then left? We'd need a distraction. A big one," Hermione says hesitantly.

They hatch a plan, between the three of them. Hermione has the idea, but Ron is good at execution. He's good at strategy. They pick an Alliance member in Yorkshire, far enough from their camp, far enough that they'll need to Apparate twice and walk the rest of the way since they aren't so familiar with the area—Cassius Bell.

When they stand at the edge of the wards, behind a thicket of bare apple trees, Hermione tilts her head. Cassius Bell doesn't have an *estate* , so much. It's a large home. The kind that Hermione thought she might want one day, to raise children with Ron. A daughter. A son. That was her dream. It's shifting now, sometimes they have platinum blond hair, but *only* when she's feeling at her loneliest even when she's in Ron's arms, like there's a piece of her missing.

"So…what now?" Ron asks, looking over at her.

Hermione frowns. She doesn't know much about Cassius Bell except that he has a grown son with a wife. They have no children. He is typically assigned as a liaison to Bulgaria. He is associated with a man named Karakaroff, whose loyalties remain unclear.

"We just…name He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Hermione says.

"Dra- *matic* ," Ginny sings. She takes a step forward and opens her mouth and then closes it, frowning.

It's harder to do on purpose.

Hermione clears her throat and steps out from behind the tree trunk and looks up at the yellow windows. "Voldemort."

The breeze stops. Hermione can almost hear the wardstones of this place cracking. Then, the sound of Apparating.

Hermione feels a hand in hers and a tap on the head as she's dragged back. "Get over here," Ron hisses, he wraps his hand around her, blindly grabbing her thigh.

Hermione recognizes the sound of her laugh as well as the feel of Ron's heartbeat under her cheek. Hermione will never forget her laugh, the way it tags along at the end of every bad dream.

Bellatrix Black used to be a ghost story. Now, she is Hermione's living nightmare.

And she is different.

Her laugh crackles through the night but she doesn't move with that same elegant swagger now. She is still rounded hips and full-figure, but there is something off. About her eyes, about her smile. Beneath her glossy eyes are lavender circles and she twitches again and again with each move, in a way that is grossly familiar to Hermione. Her black hair is no longer luscious, curls having fallen into thin waves, streaked with grey.

She is Bellatrix Black, tearing at the seams. A Bellatrix Black, half-cracked by the curse that she so very favored.

"She's been Crucio'ed…a lot," Hermione whispers.

Bellatrix Black rushes forward, cackling. "You thought you could *run,* vermin? Could hide? Using the name of the Dark Lord so *boldly* ?" she screams. She twists to look at the shrouded figures around her and she sneers a smile. "Time to play…time to *play* ."

And then the windows explode out.

" *Morsmordre!* " Bellatrix snarls, sending the green parks into the sky.

Hermione jerks into Ron's side, trembling.

"Come on, Hermione. Come *on* ," Ron hisses in her ear.

Hermione buries her face in his chest and allows him to Disapparate away, away from the ghost stories turned inside out.

Harry dreams.

In his dreams, he is in London. In Godric's Hollow. In a Forest he's never seen before. He walks, free and eyes green-bright with Life. There is a song that follows him. He does not know if it is his or one that someone before made up. But it follows him.

He moves.

He is draped in green in red in blue in yellow, and there are flowers sprouting from the frozen earth. He would make a bed there, in the middle of it all. Except the ground opens up and there lurks a Man-a Titan-a Non-Believer

(Heretic *, the world shouts.* Heretic.)

He blinks and Harry is in a Manor. In a bed. He feels arms around him, lips against the back of his neck. He is on his back, a man between his thighs, fucking him deep. Harry clings. Harry weeps. Harry falls forever.

Harry commits every crime. Every sin. And this one, spent in the arms of this man is his favorite of them all. When he cums, he is content, and Magick is chased away for just this—bruises on his hips, bite marks in his neck.

Harry walks the frozen earth again, a pomegranate in his left hand. He doesn't bother splitting it open. He knows the red jewels he'll find inside. He laces his fingers through the man's.

Harry hears the man ask, "Stay with me. Stay a thousand years."

In his dreams, Harry always —always— *says yes.*

And then, he wakes up.

Harry Potter's eyes flutter open. He does not startle awake, but he wakes up suddenly all the same. He breathes slowly, taking his surroundings into account, reminding himself. He is not his childhood bedroom in Godric's Hollow, full of children's games, old arts and crafts, and magic and Muggle stories alike. He isn't at Malfoy Manor either, surrounded by finery that isn't his own. He doesn't even have an altar.

Instead, he is in a dull grey room, every inch of it somehow stripped of color. He turns on his side, looking at a fireplace with a fire long gone out, the mantle dusty except for a single framed photo. Harry slides from the bed, the wooden floor icy against his toes, and he pulls the grey quilt with him, like a cloak.

He leans in and looks at the dust-smeared photo, years of grime caked over the glass. It's a magical photo—the only one he's seen here—of three people. He does not recognize the oldest woman, waspish with a sharp nose and long dark hair, but he does recognize the children on either side of her. Severus Snape was just as strange-looking when was a child as he is now, nose big, hair greasy, wearing a smock and a large cloak.

Harry's mother was, and is, beautiful. Long red hair, a smart sweater, a curious look in her green eyes. Harry isn't sure if Snape has forgotten this photo in here, but he doesn't think so. He thinks it's meant to torture him, just as Snape intended.

Harry turns away, shuffling across the hall.

"Potter! Down here!" Snape barks from down the dark staircase.

Harry ignores him because he always ignores Snape. He has a routine that he likes to follow, and Snape can shout all he likes. Harry is not a dog brought to heel before his master, no matter how hard Snape tries.

In the bathroom, just as old, with chipped linoleum and old porcelain, Harry relieves himself, washes his hands. He splashes cold water on his face, squinting to try to make sense of himself without his glasses.

He doesn't look different, he doesn't think. But, he feels different.

Harry *knows* things now. He knows about the best things. The worst things. He hadn't felt blind or innocent before, but he thinks he was. Blind. Deaf. Dumb. Harry isn't those things anymore, and he thinks he almost mourns that.

Harry leaves the restroom and slowly makes his way down the stairs. He has been at Spinner's End for weeks now, and the routine rarely wavers. Severus Snape is a solitary man, not used to having someone share his space. He barks at Harry, crudely, and expects him to do his part. Harry does it without complaint because he doesn't want to hear what Snape really has to say about him.

He already knows that *every* time he meets those beady black eyes, Snape is remembering how Harry looked with the Dark Lord between his legs. He remembers what Harry looked like when he fell out of his fireplace, dressed in enticing robes, a blessed knife in his fist and the Invisibility Cloak on his shoulders, face tight from weeping.

Severus Snape looks at Harry and sees his utter failure, and Harry spends hours a day pretending that it hadn't happened at all.

"You took your time," Snape snarls at him from the kitchen.

He has a kettle on the stove, next to a bubbling cauldron. That's not so unusual. The three teacups on a tray are.

Snape never serves Harry tea. He barely makes enough water for Harry to enjoy his tea.

"Who's here?" Harry snarls, pulling his wand.

Snape glowers at him for a long moment. He looks like he's biting his tongue, and Harry can just *hear* every word he wants to hurl at him, but won't— *Arrogant. Ridiculous. Blind. Whore.*

"Sitting room. Now, Potter," Snape says, clicking his tongue.

Harry scoffs and stalks past him, wand held at the ready. Harry usually stays in his room, unless it's meal times, and even then that's tentative; Snape says a lot of bullshit that makes Harry snatch his plate and stalk away.

But, sometimes, in the middle of the night, he sneaks into the dark, enclosed sitting room, full of threadbare furniture and a lamp hanging from the ceiling, to look at the books. Every wall is covered in books. Harry isn't a bookworm, but looking at them, reminds him of Hermione. The chessboard by the window reminds him of Ron. And *stealing* some of the books reminds him of Ginny.

Harry stands in the middle of the room for just a moment before there is someone before him, their arms wrapped tight.

Harry's body recognizes the man before he does. His arms come up around his father's back and he claps him between his shoulder blades, burying his face in his neck.

“Dad,” Harry rasps, his glasses pressing uncomfortably against the bridge of his nose. “ *Dad* .”

James presses Harry back, holding him by the shoulders as he stares down at him. “Thank Merlin. Magick. Every Lector ever. You’re *alright* ,” James breathes in awe, brushing Harry’s hair back, to see his eyes. James blink, hazel eyes wet behind his square frames. He steps back, pinching his nose and closing his eyes, inhaling. “Oh, *oh,* thank Merlin you’re alright.”

“Don’t cry, Dad,” Harry says, mouth twitching.

James is a crier. Always has been.

Just his words make James let out a wretched sob and Harry comes in again, hugging him tightly, memorizing the warmth. He’s missed this, that casual hand in his hair, reminding him that his father is *here* . Harry pulls back again and if the ache in his chest eases just a little, he ignores it. Better to pretend there’s no ache at all.

Harry looks past his father to the man sitting in the one armchair.

He is eccentric as always, in bright orange robes, little gold stars and tassels on the hem. His long silvery hair has gotten even longer, just as his beard, tied with a matching tassel. He has a flat tassel hat atop his head and he is smiling. Harry trusted that smile.

“Harry,” Albus Dumbledore says in greeting.

“Albus.” Harry takes a step around his father, lifting his chin as he looks up to the man.

“Months have passed and you’ve grown. You’re a man now,” Dumbledore says.

Harry nods. “Yes,” he agrees.

“You gave us quite the runaround. Refusing to leave when we came for you,” Dumbledore observes. He sounds amused. Gentle. Like a grandfather would.

He speaks in plural. The Order is him. He is the Order. It reminds Harry uncomfortably of Grindelwald.

“I had something to do. Something important,” Harry says.

Snape makes a noise in the back of his throat.

“Did you accomplish your goal?” Dumbledore asks, eyes glinting blue behind half-moon glasses. He doesn’t know. Snape hasn’t told him. But, he expects Harry to say *no* .

To humble himself.

“Not yet,” Harry says instead. “But, my goal hasn’t changed.”

My name is Harry Potter, he thinks. *My crown of lightning makes me marked.*

“Oh?” Dumbledore says.

“I am the Lector. Her Will is mine,” Harry says. It is.

It isn’t. It’s everything.

“And you know Her will?” Dumbledore asks. Still curious. Still gentle.

Harry opens his mouth. There are so many things he wishes to say. To shout and scream and condemn.

And then, Harry feels her. *Her.*

(It goes like this, in the eyes of one Severus Snape—

Harry Potter is defiant. Wilful. Stupid. Arrogant.

He looks upon this man like he is nothing, and for a split-second,

Snape thinks that even Dumbledore is convinced of his conviction.

And then, he falters. Harry Potter, arrogant stupid slut, stills.

He turns, eyes glassy and wide, and sees Her.

This is only one Her. Snape has only ever known one.)

She enters the room in black robes, long sleeves that covered her slender calloused hands, a hood over her head, not enough to cover the fierce red of her hair. She moves slowly. *Deliberately.*

Harry knows her.

Harry takes a stumbling step forward, reaching for her. She takes another step towards him and then another and then they cross the room in two leaps.

Lily Evans-Potter lowers her hood and looks her son in the eye.

“Harry,” she breathes, voice trembling just slightly.

And Harry sinks to his knees, sagging under the weight of her gaze.

There is so much in that look. Disbelief. Awe. Relief. Fear. She is afraid. *Was* afraid. He can see in the way that she finally relaxes, her shoulders falling, tension sloughing off her in waves. Harry has always known that his mother inspires fear. He knows that the only thing she’s ever feared was losing him. And this—he had *scared* her beyond anything else.

It's at that moment that Harry realizes that *this* is the worst thing he's ever done.

He looks up at her, bottom lip trembling. "Mum…I'm sorry," he says, his voice so small.

Lily stares down at him as he reaches up with one hand, gaze falling to her feet.

And then, she sinks to her knees, joining him. She reaches for his face, fingers mapping out the planes.

She tilts her head, observing him like she doesn't know what to say. Like she recognizes him and doesn't. He wants to tell her everything he's done. He wants to tell her everything he's done. He wants to confess.

(Mama, he wants to whisper.

I met a Man and he did not worship Magick.

I met a Heretic and he worshipped me *.)*

The words stick in his throat. He opens his mouth, closes it again. He leans in and so does she.

"My love, do not fear. I am here," Lily says calmly, their foreheads touching.

Harry understands now—they have the same eyes. He knows that it's not just stories. It's not just something they say. They really do have the same eyes. Everything he sees in Lily, he finally sees in himself.

"Mum, I have no fear," Harry says honestly. "Only I remain."

Lily sits back, looking at him. He can see it in her eyes; she thinks he's different too.

His father can't tell. Dumbledore can't tell.

But Harry knows. His mother knows.

Lily reaches into one of her too-long sleeves, her hands closed over something. She regards him with that secret look she used to get in her eyes, when she would teach him stories and magic and a will that the Order had tried to train out of him. Harry looks down as she opens her folded hands and he gasps, rearing back.

The chick is bald except for the single scarlet feather emerging from the top of its head, its beak still soft. It makes a soft chirping noise as it turns big glossy eyes up at Harry, and Harry knows that he is here for *him.* Harry coos softly, lifting a single finger to stroke its head.

"His name is Fawkes," Lily says.

“Fawkes,” Harry breathes. This is what his dreams were leading to, he realizes. This very moment.

He huffs out a breath of awe, and smiles.

Lily nods once. “Now, let us begin.”

(Albus Dumbledore looks on.

There is something creeping. Something approaching.

Something coming. He knows this as the truth,

As he watches Mother and Son cradle Life

In the palms of their hands.

And on the wind, Dumbledore hears this: Exalted.)

End Notes

[1] Wedding Song, Hadestown

--
We enter a brand new world in this fic, one full of war and strife and loss. There's a quiet there, right before it all begins.

Everyone is experiencing something different. The aftermath of torture. Mourning. Loss. PTSD. Poorly adjusting to things.

I think my favorite part was my tiny glimpse of how Voldemort is dealing with things. I hope what I was trying to convey there really came through. I'm just so excited to dive deeper into his mind in the sequel. This is gonna be really great to explore.

And now, I wanted to ask—I'm in the middle of outlining the sequel, now officially named *of various storms and saints* and I wanted to know who in particular you're looking forward to seeing in the work. I have a lot of plans but none of my ideas are more fleshed out beyond ideas, and only in particular for the main seven characters. And wow, that feels nice to admit who the main characters are, though I'm pretty sure it was clear from far earlier than now.

Now, please tell me what you liked, what you enjoyed, even what you have questions about. Even just to say "I liked it." Thank you so much and have a happy new year!

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